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AUTHOR Hornby, Richard
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ABSTRACT

In a review of dramaturgy (the collective techniques of dramatic composition), the concept of structuralism holds promise for treating many of the traditional problems in dramatic theory, criticism and production. Traditional attitudes toward intentions, influences, style, and interpretation have long been dominated by a historical approach, rather than a synchronic approach in which a play is isolated and examined as an ahistoric phenomenon, operating within a particular, self-enclosed system. Applying the work of the structuralists Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Roland Barthes to the traditional ideas of the primacy of theater history, the genetic fallacy (the notion that the origins of something tell us everything there is to know about it), the singleness of interpretation, the updated production, and the polarity of naturalism and style can bring better understanding to plays and staging. (AEA)

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Richard Hornby
Department of Drama
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4
Canada

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TOWARD A STRUCTURALIST DRAMATURGY

In this paper, I propose to examine some traditional ideas and practices in dramaturgy, from a Structuralist viewpoint. By "dramaturgy," I mean dramatic theory and criticism not only as it is practiced and taught by academics, but also as it influences performance. The traditional ideas I shall consider are the primacy of theatre history, and the "genetic fallacy"; the singleness of interpretation; the updated production; and the polarity of naturalism and style.

For my treatment of these traditional concepts, I shall be drawing on the work of a number of Structuralists--especially Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Roland Barthes--but this does not mean that I shall simply be transmitting some fixed ideas or techniques. "Structuralism" has unfortunately become a cult term, but it does not truly denote merely another fad in criticism, to take its place alongside previous fads of historical, linguistic, imagistic, rhetorical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, anthropological, and mythical criticisms. Structuralism transcends such particularities. It should in fact be considered as a broad trend in modern thought, reaching far beyond those who are

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usually labelled Structuralists. The ideas of the Russian, Czech, and French Structuralists are nothing to be particularly revered, nor feared; in fact, the same ideas are often found (and sometimes better expressed) in more familiar writings like the literary criticism of the New Critics; the aesthetics of Whitehead, Cassirer, and Langer; the gestalt psychology of Koehler, Wertheimer, and Koffka; the philosophy of Carnap, Quine, Wittgenstein, and Burke; and even the theatre manifestos of influential practitioners like Brecht and Artaud. I would even go so far as to say that it is impossible to be a serious contemporary thinker and not, in some way, be a Structuralist.

When it comes to dramaturgy, however, the qualifier "serious" becomes important. The low prestige of theatre studies in our universities has brought many second-rate minds into the field, who are out of touch with their time, being instead dominated by stale habits of thought. Furthermore, the theatre, as is well known, is a conservative art form that responds slowly to innovation, so that Structuralist ideas have been generally slow to invade, especially when theatre practitioners have themselves been taught by professors who think that the Revolt Against Realism is the hottest new topic in dramatic theory.

What is Structuralism?

The French Structuralist Jacques Derrida has called Structuralism "une aventure du regard," and that perhaps best expresses the sense of it, as a way of looking at things, a way that is adventuresome and radical. French Structuralists generally look to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as the source for their ideas; Saussure's works, published posthumously during the First World War, an appropriately disrupted time, proposed a revolutionary way of looking at language. Previous attempts to understand language had been based upon the individual word, or, more properly, the individual phoneme, the smallest distinguishable unit of

sound in a given language. There was the gesticulation theory, which held that language derived from a kind of auditory pointing; thus, the word "me" resonates within the speaker and seems naturally to refer to him. Or, there was the onomatopoetic theory, which held that words ultimately all sound like what they refer to; the word "hiccup," for example, sounds like a hiccup. Saussure pointed out that only a tiny percentage of words are actually gesticulative or onomatopoetic, and besides, even those vary from language. "Hiccup" may sound like a hiccup, but the German equivalent, "Schlucken," does not. Saussure maintained that, no matter how accurate such piecemeal theories may be in describing the historical origins of human language, they inevitably break down when describing how language actually functions today. Language, he said, must be studied not only diachronically--that is, historically--but also synchronically, as it exists at a given point in time, ignoring history. And, when you study language synchronically, you discover that its sounds are actually arbitrary. There is, in other words, a separation between sound and meaning, between the signifiers and the signified. It does no good to look at phonemes in isolation, one at a time; meaning arises only from the relationships of those elements to one another, in a whole system, or structure. The word "hiccup" really means a hiccup because the structure of the English language makes it mean that. Its sound pattern distinguishes it from other English words; its positioning in sentences follows certain rules that enable us to recognize it as a certain kind of word; its relationships with other words in sentences point us toward a certain concept.

But important and influential as Saussure's theories were to be, they did not come from nowhere. If we consider Structuralism, again, as a broad trend, we will note similarities between Saussure's ideas and

those that were developing in many other fields. Take modern physics, for example. Atomic physics is not new. It was invented in the Fourth Century B.C. by Democritus, who maintained that substances are not indefinitely divisible and subdivisible, but are instead made up of indivisible particles, or atoms. Thus, if you were to chop up this table into smaller and smaller pieces, you would eventually come to tiny atoms, which cannot be divided further, and which carry the essence of woodiness. When modern physicists took up atomic theory again, they found that, indeed, wood was divided into essential building blocks, which they called molecules, but that these molecules could actually be further divided, into particles called atoms. And these atoms did not carry the essence of woodiness; in fact, they could be rearranged into other molecules that formed substances that were totally unlike wood. There was thus a separation between the signifiers--the atoms--and the signified --the qualities of familiar substances. The essence of woodiness was to be found not in the atoms themselves, but rather in the relationships among them, in the structure of the molecule.

For an example from another field, consider the theories of dreams developed by Saussure's contemporary, Sigmund Freud. All people have always tried to interpret dreams, but their methods were inevitably piecemeal. Even today, Mother Bombie's Dream Book may tell you that to dream of, say, jewelry means a wedding. In Freud's theory, however, to dream of jewelry means nothing by itself; meaning occurs only when this element is considered in relation to the whole system of the patient's psychic life--his early childhood traumas, his social upbringing, and so on. (Jung, in positing "archetypes" with fixed meanings, was reverting to a former style of thinking, which is not to say that he was wrong, but only that he was not a Structuralist.)

Evidence of a broadly Structuralist outlook could be cited in almost every field of modern thought. The prevalence in intellectual discourse of such words as "relationship," "function," "process," "pattern," "system," and "structure," which were not in wide use a century ago, shows how we have moved from an intellectual orientation toward things to an orientation toward structure. In dramaturgy, the change, though slower than in most fields, is the same. A hundred years ago, dramatic criticism focussed on the individual character, usually the hero of the play, considered in isolation; now, under the influence of the New Critics, good criticism is more concerned with relationships among characters, so that the subtle connections among Fortinbras, Laertes, and Hamlet are more significant than the question of why Hamlet himself delays. Similarly, a hundred years ago, performance focussed on the isolated character, again usually the hero played by the star; now, in good companies, we find the concept of the ensemble has replaced the star system.

Nevertheless, the qualifier "good" must still be applied to both criticism and performance. There are still professors who teach plays as if they were piecemeal collections of characters, events, and ideas, so that, for instance, Ibsen's Ghosts is treated as if it were a play about syphillis when in fact it has nothing to do with syphillis. Instead, the disease is a metaphor in the play, which, in relation to a whole complex of similar metaphors, projects significance through the play's totality. (Osvald is consumed in burning fever, as his father was consumed by passion, as the orphanage is consumed by fire, and as the fire at the end of the play is consumed in blazing sunlight. The burning always destroys, but it simultaneously purifies and regenerates what it touches; even Osvald is ironically reborn at the end as a pitiful,

helpless child.)

Furthermore, the star system in acting is far from dead. And even in good companies, although far more attention is given to small roles than previously, there is still a tendency to treat those roles as independent entities rather than wholistically. That is, actors seem more concerned with creating an isolated, well-rounded, lifelike portrait than with fitting their character into the play as a whole.

Synchronism versus Theatre History

Turning from Saussure's notion of structure to the related one of synchronism, we find that the situation in dramaturgy is even worse. Diachronic study--i.e, theatre history, including reportage on contemporary theatre--is so dominant that it often drives synchronic study completely out of existence. There are many more journals, and more university courses, devoted to theatre history than to theory and criticism; there are also more jobs open for historians than for theorists and critics. Some university drama departments refuse even to offer courses in dramatic literature, criticism, or theory, which are seen as vague, "soft" subjects, in contrast to the "hard," disciplined study of theatre history. The word "literary," among theatre people, has even become a pejorative. The result is that students graduate knowing a piecemeal collection of historical facts about the theatre, but without knowing how to interpret a playscript. Somehow this state of affairs is regarded as "practical," although it can hardly be practical when a production is botched because of misinterpretation. I do not wish to attack theatre history per se; I have even written a bit of it myself. Furthermore, not all Strucutralists reject diachronic study entirely; the eastern European Structuralists employed historical techniques in their work, as did the New Critics with Shakespeare. What I do wish to

attack is the notion that theatre history is fundamental to understanding drama, that it must somehow always be the basis for study. As a matter of fact, theatre history may actually obscure our comprehension of a play; the fact that original audiences took Ghosts to be a scandalous play about venereal disease can blind modern students to the play's activity, its systematic interconnectedness.

The idea of the primacy of theatre history is based on what some Structuralists have called the "genetic fallacy," the notion that the origins of something tell us everything there is to know about it. In the case of dramaturgy, the genetic fallacy holds that to understand a play, it is uniquely important to know about its author, his influences, his "intentions," and the conditions of his theatre. But actually, in interpreting drama, while one may find important keys in theatre history, one never finds all of them there, and sometimes one finds none at all. Despite popular beliefs, it is quite possible for plays to carry meanings that the original audiences, the original theatre company, and even the playwright himself, never grasped or intended.

Codes and Pluralistic Interpretation

To explain the reasons for this apparent paradox, I shall employ the theories of Roman Jakobson. Jakobson is probably the predominent figure in all Structuralism, especially since he has been associated with all three major schools: Born in Moscow in 1894, he was one of the early Russian Formalists; moving to Prague in 1920, he brought the ideas of the Formalists to the Prague Linguistic Circle of Structuralists; leaving Czechoslovakia at the time of Hitler's takeover, he moved to New York City, where he met, and influenced, the French Structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss. (The two eventually collaborated on a famous Structuralist

essay on Baudelaire's poem, "Les Chats.")

One of Jakobson's major contribution has been his formulation of the act of communication, showing it to involve six factors, arranged triadically:

CONTEXT

ADDRESSER — MESSAGE — ADDRESSEE

CONTACT

CODE

The important thing to recognize is that the message, sent from the addresser to the addressee, is never the total meaning; meaning in fact changes when any of the six factors is changed. (Note, again, the Structuralist attitude in the importance of an entire, interconnected system, rather than of an isolated element.) In the case of drama, the addresser would be the playwright; the message, the play itself; and the addressee, the audience member or reader. Most people would accept the idea that changing playwright or play alters meaning, although in the case of the latter some directors, oddly, do seem to feel that they can make drastic changes and still mean the same. A more interesting point is that, for Jakobson, each individual addressee has, in a sense, his own play, a valuable point to remember. Theatre people often talk of "the audience" as if it were a fixed entity, but there are in fact many audiences for a given play, and many different responses within each given audience.

It is the central column, however, that is the most important for dramaturgy, because it not only explains certain contemporary trends, it also clears up some traditional problems. The context includes the whole sociohistorical complex within which the play takes place. As it changes, meaning changes; thus it is possible for Shakespeare to be "our contemporary," not because Shakespeare wrote with a prescient eye on the twen-

tieth century, but because differing circumstances develop or obscure differing relationships within the play, thus creating new patterns of significance. The contact is the means of communication, and, again, the experience of the play is different when read from what it is when seen on stage, and different again when seen on film. (In fact, a production becomes different if it is moved to a new theatre, or if an actor is changed, or if a light cue is flubbed. Even in a meticulous production, each performance carries a slightly different meaning.) Finally, the code, which is the system of thought by which we interpret what we see, affects meaning in a profound way. It is the reason why criticism is necessary. Each critical approach decodes the play for us in a different way. Thus, the psychoanalytic critic shows us a different Hamlet from the historical critic, who shows us a different Hamlet from the anthropological critic.

The trouble in traditional dramaturgy is that each critic has tended to view his own particular approach, or code, as exclusively correct, with all other codes as worthless, or, at best, secondary. Such a critic may not even believe that he is employing a code, but think instead that he is merely pointing out tangible, fixed truths. In other words, traditional critics are unaware of context, contact, and, in particular, code. They conceive of artistic communication as a simple, direct telephone line from playwright to audience; the critic's job is merely that of a telephone operator, to get the two together. Instead of taking this simple-minded view, we need to see criticism as an active, creative act, a construction of a model of a play in a kind of collaboration with the playwright. New codes create new models, which is why criticism continues indefinitely; there is literally no end to writing new things about Hamlet. And no single code should be considered total or even primary; the historical approach is just one approach among a wide range of possibilities. As such, it is

neither more nor less important than any other approach. The test is, in the end, not whether an interpretation of a play is based on good historical evidence, but whether it exposes previously unnoticed structures within the play that are significant.

The "Updated" Production

One could note a similarity of attitude here to that of producers of classical plays today. Directors of Shakespeare, for example, have come to realize that it is hardly necessary to be true to Shakespeare's "intentions," when Shakespeare never intended for his plays to be produced in our century anyway. Furthermore, historical explications based on, say, the Essex Rebellion, are of little use in the theatre, where few audience members will know who the Earl of Essex was unless there is a note in the program. Such directors recognize, quite properly, that the production of Shakespeare today must lead to a new, vital communication with an audience. Unfortunately, however, directors often try to create this updating by making drastic alterations in the playscript itself, rather than realizing that meaning can be changed by altering context, contact, and code. To change the message itself is inevitably reductive when that message is a rich and complex play. Instead of such simple-minded tampering, the proper procedure for making Shakespeare into our contemporary in the theatre is to find codes that expose the play's contemporary meanings, and then to find means of contact (i.e, of staging) that will embody those meanings.

In Jakobson's view, although the six elements are always present in any act of communication, different elements come to the fore in differing kinds of communication, while the others move to the background. In artistic communication, it is the message itself that is in the foreground. This idea reflects his original experience as one of the Russian

Formalists. Saussure had made no particular distinction between artistic communication and ordinary discourse, an omission that remains a problem with much of French Structuralism today. (And since the French Structuralists are the main ones read in America, the problem has spread here.) The Russian Formalists, however, made this distinction central to their theory. In an artistic work, they maintained, language is directed toward the sign itself; the signifier and the signified are once again united, although the connection is subtle and metaphorical rather than logical and direct. For example, when Hopkins's poem "Pied Beauty" presents us with a string of alliterative antonyms--"swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim"--the sounds are not arbitrary; instead, the similarities of sound are there to suggest, metaphorically, that there is unity behind apparent opposition. With artistic communication, then, we become aware of the message as an objective entity, estranged from us. (There is a striking similarity here to Brecht's concept of Verfremdungseffekt, and there may have been an indirect influence, since Brecht knew the work of Mayakovsky and Meyerhold, who were influenced by the Formalists.)

The proper function of the director of the classical play, then, is not to alter the play but rather to foreground it, to focus the audience's attention on the play in itself. Just as a good playwright can make us see ordinary, mundane life as something odd, so too should the director make the standard, overworked classical play into something mysterious, strange, numinous. The recent work of the Royal Shakespeare Company provides many good examples. For instance, their production of Macbeth in a twenty-foot circle, with nothing for props but old crates, and the audience seated within arm's length, restored this overworked play's vitality and stylishness. The drastically new physical relationships among the actors, and between actors and audience, made us see and hear the play afresh.

"Style"

The need for estrangement is as important with modern naturalistic drama as it is with Shakespeare. Here, a particularly debilitating concept in dramatic theory has been the polarity of naturalism and "style." Books with titles like The Rediscovery of Style and Acting in Person and in Style imply that naturalism is flat, flavorless drama with no opportunities for interpretation or variation, and no possible grace or elegance. Naturalism is that telephone line again. And certainly theatre history bears this view out; the naturalistic playwrights of the late nineteenth century trumpeted their intention to remove all convention and artifice from the stage, and critics and audiences accepted them on those terms.

Now, as a matter of act, the French Structuralist critic Roland Barthes has dealt with the same issue in French literature, in his book Le Degré Zéro de L'Écriture. Here, Barthes pointed out that classical French writing, long prized for its supposed neutral, impersonal objectivity, is in fact a highly conventionalized form that shapes reality to fit the world view of the bourgeoisie, which includes most of its readers and writers. In Barthes's view, there is no such thing as styleless, blank, "zero degree" writing; there is always style, although the style that is closest to us is the hardest to discern, just as it is hard for a fish to discern the water in which it swims. Returning to Jakobson's theory, we see, again, that style is never a quality of the message per se; instead, style arises whenever a message is estranged or "foregrounded." In theatre, naturalism is as potentially stylish as any other dramatic form; in fact, the only truly unstylish play is the one that is badly performed.

I suggest that naturalistic drama, the dominant form for the past hundred years, needs far more attention than it has received as an

aesthetic phenomenon. The historical view, which categorizes it as a neutral form that simply transmits reality, because the playwrights expressed that as their purpose, is ridiculously inadequate. Far from being the simplest dramatic form, classical naturalism, for us at this moment, is the most difficult to treat theoretically, and the most difficult to stage effectively. Theorists need to explicate its conventions as Barthes did with classical French writing, and directors need to stage it in ways that will enable us to see it as new.

Conclusion

In sum, then, Structuralism holds vast promise for treating many of the traditional problems in dramatic theory, criticism, and production. The traditional attitudes toward intentions, influences, style, and interpretation have too long been dominated by the historical approach. It is time, instead, to take a synchronic approach, in which a play is isolated and examined as an ahistoric phenomenon, operating within a particular, self-enclosed system. When we understand these systems, we will better understand the plays that make them up, and, perhaps most important, we will stage them better.